

Research Community Rationale and Plan of Work

A key theme in landscape-based research is the study of human-environment interactions. At the center of human-environment research is the goal of understanding how nature and human society produce each other relationally. While emphasis on this research within geography has fluctuated (Butzer 2002; Turner 2002), Kates (1987: 527) argued that “the human-environment tradition still poses great, enduring, intellectual, and scientific challenges, some of which are inexorably linked with the very survival of human kind.” Leaders in human-environment research (e.g., Mabogunje 1984) have successfully bridged the natural and social sciences, yet still there are underexplored opportunities for interdisciplinary research on conservation and sustainable development. Ostrom (2007: 15181) calls for scholars to move “beyond panaceas to develop cumulative capacities to diagnose the problems and potentialities of linked [social-ecological systems]” arguing for the “study of complex, multivariable, nonlinear, cross-scale, and changing systems.” We propose to use LARC funding to conduct social-ecological research drawing from transdisciplinary theory and methods in two Latin American landscapes: chiltepin harvesting in the Rio Sonora Valley of northern Mexico, and interlocking territorial claims of indigenous peoples and conservationists in Guatemala.

A LARC grant offers the opportunity to bring together students in dialogues across and within disciplines. Interdisciplinary research on human-environment interactions shapes our research perspective in two key ways: (1) different methods can be used to illustrate the partiality of knowledge, such as using interviews to inform survey data; and (2) mixing methods offers the opportunity to analyze the discrepancy between differing results (Nightingale 2003; Rocheleau 1995). Broadly speaking, Chambers and her students are interested in social-ecological interactions, while Ybarra and her students will focus on linking identity production to territorial claims. Our discussion as a research community will foster linkages between our methodological approaches and—we believe—strengthen both projects as an outcome.

Within the research community, each student will develop a research question and methodological approach to address it. To foster intellectual cross-pollination, students will work in a shared office. We will also have weekly meetings consisting of the following activities: presenting our developing research for feedback; reading group to reflect on key works on human-environmental interactions and their importance to our projects; and field visits to engage with the broader researcher community. Our work as a research community will both strengthen the larger research projects and demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary collaboration in the liberal arts, thus providing opportunities to contribute to the Willamette community.

Each student will produce an article-length manuscript and present their work during a fall conference at Willamette; they may also submit their papers for peer-reviewed publication. The students’ work will also inform books by Chambers and Ybarra. Furthermore, a shared and active research agenda provides real-life context to our Latin American Studies, Environmental Science, and Politics classes.